

# Using and Perfecting the Universal Languages of Art

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At EGS and in *POEISIS* the languages of art are primary. To access depths of emotion, we need the arts. Spontaneous expressions hold contradiction and complexity and then communicate them all immediately. They emerge from outside mental controls and plans, always a few steps ahead of the mind reflecting on them.

I believe that training in this discipline has to be based on finding a personal artistic truth or vision within a community of inquiry. How can we ask others to do what we do not do ourselves? Our collective experimentation shows how infinite differences of expression open to the universal streams of art healing.

While valuing partnership with psychology I question the prevailing tendency in the arts therapies to view artistic expressions as "data" and then decode what happens into the formats of social science, contrary to Rudolf Arnheim's belief that good art theory smells like the studio. When appropriate, why not let art take the lead in the



relationship? And present the outcomes in ways that look, feel, and sound like it. Allow art to speak for itself, inspire, and offer evidence without relaxing the necessary and creative tension with psychology.

Discursive speech, our most habitual and generally comfortable way of responding to artistic expressions, tends to reinforce the imbalance with psychology. It is a universal default mode because it reinforces control and guards against the unexpected. Talking is important in the arts therapies but we tend to do it too much and with terrible psychological language--a topic for another time. It can be viewed as strange to respond with movement, voice, or some other form of performance even though these art forms speak universal languages with transcultural features yet to be adequately addressed by the arts therapies.

We all need support to do what is different and new. My current practice of silent witnessing and holding artistic expression that I see as the basis of our work with others is informed by vivid memories of Paolo Knill in the 1970s sitting with wordless concentration while another person created art. I realized that his attentive presence, a kind of contemplative and sacred act, was the response, and perhaps the best one that could be given. I adapted it to my own way of witnessing, saying that this moment has to become the most important one in my life—right now. As I interpret paintings with movement, voice, performance, and imaginal dialogue I recall being reminded not to overly rely on narrative explanation by Margo Fuchs' example of reliably responding to performers with drawings and poems.

We need to use and perfect the languages of art, make them the norm in the arts therapies, rather than feel compelled to transpose what we do into something other than itself.

#### References

McNiff, S. (2014). "Presentations that look and feel like the arts in therapy: Keeping creative tension with psychology," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy*, 9 (1), 89-94.

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The two paintings on the previous page are responses to visits to EGS.



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